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Brackett, Jeffrey
Richardson

The charity organization
movement

Boston

1895

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THE CHARITY ORGANIZATION
MOVEMENT:

Its Tendency and its Duty.

AN ADDRESS MADE TO THE TWENTY-SECOND NATIONAL CONFERENCE
OF CHARITIES AND CORRECTION, NEW HAVEN, CONN.,
MAY 28, 1895

BY

JEFFREY R. BRACKETT, PH.D.,
OF BALTIMORE.

BOSTON:

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21

THE CHARITY ORGANIZATION MOVEMENT:

ITS TENDENCY AND ITS DUTY.

Since the Society for Organizing Charitable Relief and Repressing Mendicity, the first Charity Organization Society, was formed in London, twenty-seven years ago, over a hundred and fifty societies under that name, or a kindred name, have been formed, nearly all in Great Britain and the United States. To dwell to-night in a congratulatory vein on figures which show merely much good accomplished would seem to me to be unworthy this occasion. Three-fifths of all these societies belong to the United States. The oldest one is but eighteen years old, more than half are under ten years, several have died in infancy. The Charity Organization movement is in its youth, its formative period. Let us who represent its guides in America — gathered here from all parts of the land, in a sure knowledge of great good accomplished and in hope of greater good to come — examine carefully its tendencies. Then, if we see faults, let us try to do away with them; if we find higher duties, let us try to do them.

The object of the Charity Organization movement, as given at its start in London, was the diminution of poverty and pauperism by co-operation of benevolent forces and diffusion of knowledge touching charity and benevolence. The details of method then adopted have largely become as familiar to us as our A, B, C,— the careful investigation, the adequacy of relief, etc. But permit me to remind you that they included these: that working centres should be local, use being made of local interest and knowledge; that the work of individuals, volunteers, personal service, is one of the chief factors of Charity Organization, and is to be stimulated by it; that material relief, when needed, is to come from the organization direct only when it cannot be had from other sources, and is to be as far as possible in the form of loans; and, lastly, the thought that underlies

all, that any temporary aid should tend to the permanent advantage of the receiver, and so to the lessening of poverty and pauperism.

With the question, what has been the tendency in these twenty-seven years of the societies in Great Britain, we are more indirectly interested than directly concerned. Conditions vary, and they no doubt have their own problems to solve. But human nature is much the same the world over. Reports of over sixty British societies for organizing charity show that nearly all of them deal largely in direct gifts of material relief. A few have provided work-tests or work-relief; but more have given food to vagrants or have promoted the use of free-food tickets, etc. Co-operation and volunteer work seem, as a rule, to be as yet not highly developed. We turn from these reports with a sense of filial veneration for the London society and its great work, with the conviction that real charity is growing in Great Britain, but with another warning, that there is little in a mere name, that societies, like men, tend to fall away from high principles.

And how is it with us in America? The object of the Charity Organization movement is the same the world over. Are the methods which we are following, to reach it, the best methods? First, as to relief; for the stand which a society takes on relief affects every aspect of its work. A majority of us—a bare majority, indeed, counting societies, but a strong majority if greater weight be given to the leading societies and workers—proclaim and maintain the principle of having no general fund for material relief, of procuring such relief, when needed, from others who give it. A very few have established auxiliary relief funds, kept separate from their own treasuries. All of us believe, of course, that assistance to the needy to get regular work is better than any material relief. Some of us, as New York, Boston, Buffalo, Baltimore, proclaim it as one of our aims. Yet the society in Brooklyn alone, last year, secured permanent work for almost as many, if not as many, persons as all the other societies in the country put together. At least seventeen societies—a noticeable increase—now maintain wood-yards, work-rooms, or other agencies for directly providing relief by work, partly for wanderers, partly for wanderers and residents. At least nine in 1893-94 and seven (some the same, some others) in 1894-95 provided emergency relief by work. As many more handled the distribution of special funds.

Next, as to co-operation. Nearly all societies report that it is increasing. Most of those in communities where there is public outdoor relief report friendly or mutually helpful relations with the officials. But answers to specific questions as to details show that co-operation consists so far very much more in our making investigations for others than in our securing assistance from them, even in reports of what they do. Some societies seem to be making little or no effort to get such reports. Especially noticeable is the lack of intimate relations with churches and individuals,—those sources of much harmful relief, if working apart, those sources of the best relief, in both materials and personal service, if we can secure them as allies.

How, now, do we stand as to personal service? Nearly all societies declare in their aims the promotion of "friendly visiting." The number of visitors has increased in the past few years; and, happily, this increase is not confined to a few large cities. Yet there are noticeable exceptions here. The oldest large society, and also the society in the largest city in the land, have but few. In one city of nearly 300,000 persons, a society thirteen years old has none. In another city of over 200,000 persons, a society eleven years old has given up this form of volunteer work after five years' trial; and several societies in small communities report diminishing numbers. As to the character of friendly visiting work, the majority of visitors seem to feel that their only duty is to see their families through some immediate need.

Lastly, what of educational work—the spreading of knowledge of wiser methods of benevolent activity? Much has been done. Many a community owes a debt to its Charity Organization Society—a debt none the less large because often little realized and seldom repaid. Some of this has been done, directly, by institutions established or special efforts made by societies; some indirectly, by independent agencies promoted by them. Much of it has been accomplished by one form of volunteer work, that of influential members and managers. To recite it all would be like giving Homer's catalogues of ships and heroes.

Such, in brief, has been the tendency of the Charity Organization movement in America. We have gone a little way up the steep hillside; but already some have wandered from the path, a few have given up and turned back. To play the pedagogue or prophet is

often a thankless task; but I venture to speak out frankly what seems to me to be the lessons which have been taught us, which we must heed.

We should stand firm on the rock, on which most of us have chosen to stand, of not dealing directly in material relief. If we do, we shall secure that relief, when it is needed, all the more gladly; but, above all, we shall cultivate the habit of helping the needy to get work, and a dozen things of greater price than alms. To get funds for material relief, and to dispense it, is the easiest way; but it is not the best way. And let us try to stand firm in dull times as well as good times. So-called emergencies are usually exaggerated, especially by the notion (too often promoted, for selfish ends, by newspapers and others) that relief cannot be secured in quiet ways for those who merit it. Golden Books and Loan and Grant Funds must be carefully guarded; for they tend to grow, in dull times, in both size and permanence. In securing needed relief, we should look first to relatives, friends, individuals, churches, and should turn, as a last resource only, to large relief societies and public aid. To turn to some convenient official is easier, but to rouse to activity or to turn from wasteful use the aid of individual or church is far better. There is too much tendency to-day to look upon the public purse as the resource for all needs; while, on the other hand, in churches and small bands of workers and individuals are to be found the highest exponents of charity, those who will give not merely of their means, but of their time and energy.

Some of our societies show a marked tendency to centralization, to mere officialism. Believe me, this is most dangerous. In the local divisions, the districts, should meet together the representatives of local bodies and the local benevolent workers, full of local interest and knowledge. Churches and little societies and individuals have not, as a rule, been persuaded—and they will not, I believe, be persuaded soon—to report officially the benevolent work they do, in order to build up, in some distant office, any system of registration. But the best workers in the churches, in the King's Daughters, and in this and that little group, and many single workers, can be brought into the district offices, to learn by conviction, from experience, how much our methods will help them and help the poor, and so to learn how to help us to real co-operation. Without such co-operation, how can wasteful and harmful relief be

avoided? The springs of our work lie in the districts. Dry these up, and the whole stream will narrow. In this respect the London society sets us a splendid example, which we, by keeping our stand of not giving material relief, may safely follow.

I speak last of another general method of work, because it seems to me to be, with all that has been done along its lines, the one that we most neglect. Yet it is most vital. Perhaps for this reason the London society now puts first, of its methods for improving the condition of the poor, the "propagation of sound principles and views in regard to the administration of charity." The education of public opinion to ideas of true benevolence! Each individual that we help up and on is a means to this end; but I think that our critics are often just in saying that, while we are busy over little things, we omit matters of great weight. Are we moving a few individuals to healthy homes, and yet leaving, without protest perhaps, the unfit houses for others to occupy? Are various agencies—such, for example, as dispensaries—giving away things, largely for the benefit of the promoters, and to the detriment of multitudes who can and should pay for what they get? Are first offenders being turned into criminals by close contact with criminals? Are we doling out alms to ignorant men and women staggering under debt, when we should on the one hand educate them, and on the other hand stop the exorbitant usury? I do not believe that we are doing all we can, by our influence as societies and as individuals, to abolish all conditions which depress, and to promote measures which raise men and neighborhoods and communities. In most of our cities and towns official outdoor relief is given. In some the amount has been lessened. In a few—Boston, for instance—it has increased. Brooklyn, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Memphis—certainly, types of cities different in size and in many conditions—report no such relief, with thanks that there is none. Can the other societies justify its existence in their communities? What effect does it have on their object,—the diminution of poverty and pauperism?

Through all this,—for fighting down the need of alms, for securing material aid, when necessary, in the wisest way, for real co-operation, for educating public opinion,—personal service is absolutely necessary. As it is the basis of true charity work, we must first and foremost seek its aid. We, of all persons, must not give the idea that

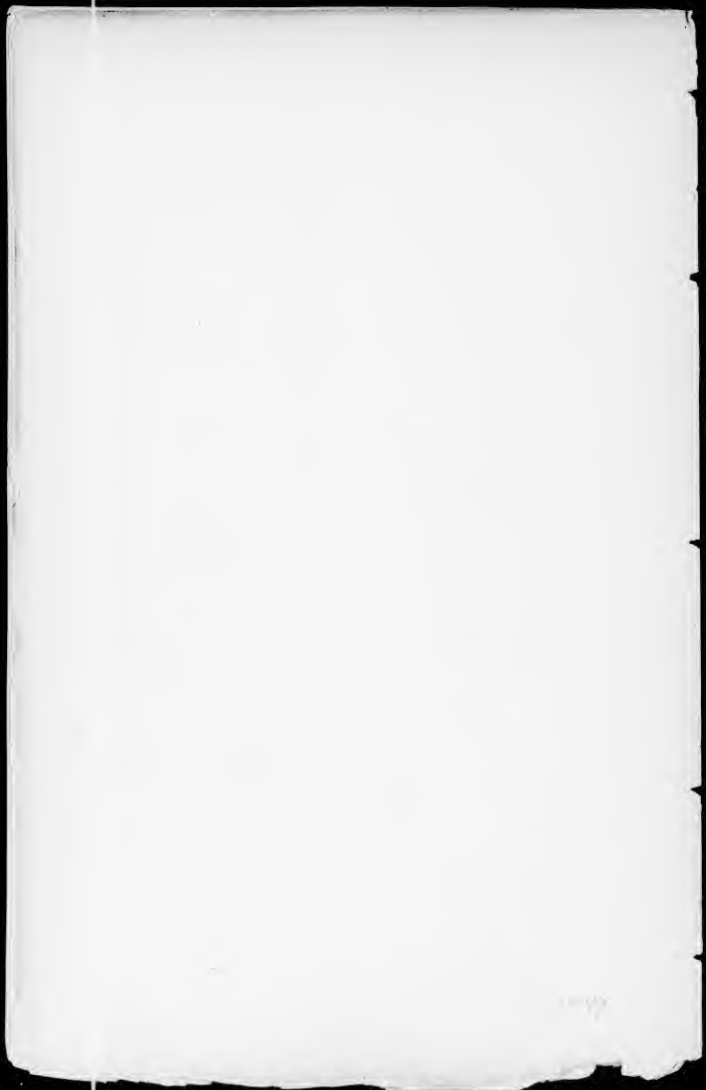
charity can be done by mere officialism or mechanism. Neglect of the element of personality in both officials and volunteers has wrecked some of our societies. A society for organizing charity is not like many things,—a bank, an insurance company,—which most men believe are absolutely necessary, and which, because profitable, one or another good business man will manage well. To establish it is not easy, to maintain it is harder still. The mere fact that it ought to be a help and economy to all charities is not enough to keep it alive with any useful vitality, especially if lean treasuries and petty jealousies and fears of “red tape,” etc., make charitable bodies and churches lukewarm to it. The higher are the methods it follows, the harder is its way. An energetic and tactful official—one who knows what Charity Organization means and is doing elsewhere—is no less necessary than are painstaking and public-spirited volunteers as managers, who will make it, not everybody’s business, but their business. The wise direction of benevolent forces is not like the American politician’s idea of public office,—something that anybody can do. The lives of some of our societies show fluctuations down and up, from practical disorganization to high efficiency, according to the personal element, to those in whose hands they chanced to be.

There is one more question to be asked, but not answered here; for the answer must vary with the peculiar conditions in each community. Do not some of us at times subordinate to ease and peace, or a petty co-operation, the great and helpful results which might come from a campaign of education? The cause of charity is suffering almost as much to-day by ignorance and indifference in the management of institutions and societies as the cause of good government is suffering from the venality of bad citizens and the indifference of so-called good citizens. A prominent charity worker once likened the model Charity Organization society to a union railroad depot, the terminus of all the charities of a city. The simile would be good, to my mind, provided all the charities be good. But what if some of these charities by ignorance and antiquated methods are working against the very aim of organized charity! We would not think much of a great railroad which would be content to endanger the lives of all its passengers by using a depot together with a miserably managed road. Not peace, but a sword, has been and must be, at times, the means to a high end. Our name, especially

“Associated Charities,” which most of us happily have taken, expresses not an end, but a means. Knowing the end before us, let each society, in this regard, take the best means for reaching it.

Some of you may not agree with me that personal service and the education of public opinion are the most important methods in our work. If so, it is because you believe that the Charity Organization movement can succeed along the line of least resistance. I believe that it can succeed only along the line of most resistance, where the hardest work lies. I do not wish to come to our feast to-night to point to mystic words upon the wall; but I solemnly believe that the Charity Organization societies must work harder to do away with the causes of poverty and pauperism, or they will be weighed in the balance and found wanting.

Let us to-night resolve so to work as not to be found wanting. Much of the failure and discouragement that we know comes from the very loftiness of our object, and the high character of the only methods by which it can be reached. We must strive harder to keep that end in view, to guide our way by those methods. We must have not less co-operation, but more of it of a broader nature, not so much on paper as with persons working for positive results; not less giving of money, but more giving of time and energy and intelligence; not so much apathy to harm, but the willingness to fight against harm; not misconception of the word “charity,” but the effort to bring it back to its God-given meaning. Following these guides, we may safely press on. Then, if men sneer at our work as “scientific” charity or call it new charity, we may answer that charity bears no qualification, and began when man first turned to raise up his fellow-man. The socialists and the impatient of every kind, talking of cross-cut paths to the millennium, may call us slow and trivial; but we shall go on, believing that we are in the right way—a long tedious way, perhaps, but the sure way to lessening poverty and pauperism.



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